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Dozens of Afghan refugees missing, thousands displaced

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PESHAWAR - Dozens of Afghan refugees have been reported missing and thousands displaced by severe floods in Pakistan over the past two weeks, according to refugees, aid workers and officials.

Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa (KP) Province, northwestern Pakistan, where most of the 1.7 million Afghan refugees registered in Pakistan are living, has been worst affected, officials said.

At least two camps, which accommodated over 5,000 refugee families, have been washed away by floods, Jamaluddin Shah, a Pakistani government commissioner on Afghan refugee affairs in KP, told IRIN.

Floods have damaged thousands of houses in about 20 refugee camps out of 29 across the province, he said.

"Some displaced refugees have been temporarily sheltered at schools and in other buildings," said Shah, adding that the exact number of Afghan refugees killed by the floods was unknown. "Dozens of people are reported missing," he said.

The floods are the worst to hit Pakistan in decades.

[<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=90038>] Hundreds have lost their lives, tens of thousands have been displaced and about three million people have been affected, aid agencies and government officials say.

"We have no shelter, no food and don't know how long this catastrophe will continue," said Abdul Wasi, a refugee in Azakhil camp, northeastern KP, where hundreds of houses have been completely destroyed.

"My wife and two children are missing," said another refugee, Zabiullah.

Diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases have been reported in several affected areas, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) said in a situation update on 2 August.

Response

In collaboration with other aid agencies, WHO said it had helped send mobile health teams to some of the worst affected areas in a bid to prevent outbreaks of contagious diseases.

Officials in the Afghan Commissioners' Office said cooked food had been distributed to some of the most vulnerable refugee families sheltering in schools.

"UNHCR [the UN Refugee Agency] has given us some tents and non-food aid items which we will start distributing soon," said commissioner Shah.

Provision of relief to flood-affected communities has been described as slow and there has been criticism of the government. [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10847793>].

Salih Mohammad Sherzai, the Afghan consul in KP, said the Afghan government was considering ways to provide assistance.

However, Afghanistan is struggling with its own flood crisis: up to 80 people are feared dead. [<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=35507&Cr=Afghan&Cr1>] It is unclear what the government would be able to do to help Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Some 300 refugees reportedly returned from KP to Afghanistan on 2 August, despite the floods. According to UNHCR, over 90,000 refugees have voluntarily returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan since 22 March.